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CAPITAL AFTER LOUIS ALTHUSSER. FOCUSING ON VALUE-FORM ANALYSIS¹

ECONOFICTION ALTHUSSER, CAPITAL, MARX, MARXISM, MONEY, VALUE-FORM

1 Paper presented at the Conference “Rileggere *Il Capitale*: La lezione di Louis Althusser”, organized by the Department of Historical Studies of the University Ca' Foscari, November 9-11, 2006, Venice, Italy.

1. Althusser's legacy: *Capital* as change of “object, theory and method”¹

In 1965, one of the most important books of Louis Althusser and “his group” was published, *Reading Capital*.² *Capital* is, from a theoretical point of view, the most important work of Karl Marx: it lays the tenets of the notional system of the Critique of Political Economy, through which the causal structure of the (capitalist) society and economy can be deciphered.

However, as Marxist theory has never been one and only, *Capital* has always been an object of dispute. Each and every Marxism finds in *Capital* the ultimate source of its own version of Marxist theory. Besides, most of Marx’s academic critics focus on *Capital* to reject Marx’s analysis.

The thesis that I am going to defend is that the theoretical intervention of Louis Althusser and his collaborators enables Marxists, to a much broader extent than before, to comprehend Marx’s value theory as a discipline which is founded in contrast, in radical theoretical confrontation, with classical (as well as to any later or contemporary) value theory.

Althusser explicitly formulates this thesis, in the form of a rhetorical question, in the very first pages of *Reading Capital*:

“Is *Capital* merely a continuation or even culmination of classical political economy, from which Marx inherited both object and concepts? And is *Capital* distinguished from classical economics not by its object, but only by its *method*, the dialectic he borrowed from Hegel? Or, on the contrary, does *Capital* constitute a real epistemological mutation of its object, theory and method? Does *Capital* represent the founding moment of a new discipline, the founding moment of a science – and hence a real event, a theoretical revolution, simultaneously rejecting the classical political economy and the Hegelian and Feuerbachian ideologies of its prehistory – the absolute beginning of the history of a science?” (Althusser in Althusser-Balibar 1997, p. 15).

This thesis has tremendous consequences for the status of Marxist theory itself. It must be reminded at this point that the classical economists and especially David Ricardo defined value as “contained labour”, i.e. as the quantity of “labour expended” for producing and bringing a commodity to the market. As Ricardo put it:

“The value of a commodity, or the quantity of any other commodity for which it will exchange, depends on the relative quantity of labour which is necessary for its production, and not on the greater or less compensation which is paid for that labour” (Ricardo 1992, p. 5).³

This classical value concept enables the formulation of a theory of exploitation, as the “deduction” to the benefit of the non-labouring classes (capitalists and landlords) of a part of the value produced by the worker and contained in commodities. Adam Smith writes in this respect:

“As soon as land becomes private property, the landlord demands a share of almost all the produce which the labourer can either raise, or collect from it. His rent makes the *first deduction from the produce of the labour* which is employed upon land. (...) Profit, makes a *second deduction from the produce of the labour* which is employed upon land” (Smith 1981: I.viii.6 and 7, emphasis added).

What is most important, is that most Marxists confine Marx’s value concept to the theoretical

framework defined by the above two classical theses. In other words, most Marxists seem to comprehend Marx's value theory as a "correction" or a dialectical "evolution and maturation" of this classical (Ricardian) "labour-expended" or "labour-contained" theory: they conceive Marx's theory as a critical *continuation* of Ricardian theory rather than a *breach* with it.

It is characteristic that two of the most prominent historical Marxist theoreticians and political leaders, W. I. Lenin and A. Gramsci, had stressed this alleged theoretical "continuity" between Ricardo's and Marx's value theory:

"Adam Smith and David Ricardo laid the foundations of the labour theory of value. *Marx continued their work*. He rigidly *proved and consistently developed this theory*" (Lenin-internet: "Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism" [1913], emphasis added).

"It seems to me that in a certain sense we can say that the philosophy of praxis [meaning Marxism, J.M.] equals Hegel + David Ricardo [...] Ricardo is to be conjoined with Hegel and Robespierre" (Gramsci, A., *Quaderni del carcere*, Torino: Einaudi, 1977, pp. 1247-8).⁴

The same argument as regards the common conceptual foundations of Ricardo's and Marx's value theories is posited by almost all Neoclassical historians of economic theory, who often put emphasis on the supposed non-originality of Marx's analysis. Paul Samuelson argued that we must see Marx as "a minor post-Ricardian" (cited in Meikle 1995, p. 185) and Schumpeter stated that Marx was one major exponent of Ricardo's economic theory:

"Marx must be considered a 'classic' economist and more specifically a member of the Ricardian group" (Schumpeter 1994, p. 390).

G.D.H. Cole, in a more nuanced treatment, wrote of the line of argument developed in the first volume of *Capital*:

"Not one single idea in this theory of value was invented by Marx [...] Marx merely took over this conception from the classical economists. [...] There is nothing specifically Marxian about Marx's theory of value; what is novel is the use to which he puts the theory, not the theory itself" (Introduction to the Everyman edition of *Capital*, Vol. 1, London, p. xxi. Cited in Meikle 1995, p. 185).

To this perception, that a theoretical affinity and continuity connects classical value theory and Marx's "Critique of the Political Economy"⁵, Althusser counter-poses the thesis of a radical breach between the two theoretical systems of thought.

It is indeed one aspect that is frequently overlooked in discussions of the work of Althusser and his "school", namely that he was systematically engaged with the actual text of *Capital* as site of a *critical theoretical breakthrough*. This return to Marx and the attempt at conducting a collective re-examination of the text of *Capital* and the tensions that pervade it, in the 1960s was embodied in a movement which, at least chronologically, preceded the current debate on the theory of value, which began in the 1970s.

Althusser theoretical programme⁶ founded the thesis of Marx's critical breach with classical

political economy on the following grounds:

a) It has defended the *originality* of the Marxist oeuvre, which cannot be assimilated to any other philosophical tradition, insisting that it should not be read through any borrowed philosophical prism (theoretical humanism, historical dialectics). In this context Althusser's analysis emphasizes three elements:

- *theoretical anti-humanism* (rejecting every form of essentialism),
- *anti-historicism* (distinction between history as a process and theoretical disquisitions on history),
- the existence of *contradictions in Marx's writings*, especially stressing Marx's "epistemological break" after 1845.

b) It has introduced the distinction between a materialist dialectical conception of social contradictions and other schemata derived from the "philosophy of history", including certain Marxist interpretations of the work of Hegel.

c) It has defended an original conception of social totality *incorporating* both *political power* and *ideological relations as central structural determinants of the capitalist mode of production* and through the key concept of over-determination it has sought to raise the question of a non-metaphysical and non-teleological theory of determination.

d) It has drawn a dividing line between the terms under which historical social forms or elements and interpenetrating social practices make their appearance and the synchronic dimension of reproduction of a mode of production as a *structured social totality*.

e) It has insisted on the analytic priority of class struggle and the priority of productive relations over productive forces.

f) It has offered an analysis of ideological representations not as forms of false or mystified consciousness but as socially necessary forms of social misrecognition that are reproduced in practices.⁷

Althusser argues that what classical economists did not comprehend is not the outcome of "mistakes" or oversight, but the *necessary outcome* of a (bourgeoisie) problematique which lacks theoretical coherence and, consequently, cannot pose questions and formulate notions that reveal the causal structures behind observable phenomena:

"the invisible is the theoretical problematic's non-vision of its non-objects" (Althusser 1997, op.cit., p. 26).

And he concludes:

"Marx's critique of Political Economy is therefore a very radical one: it queries not only the object of Political Economy, but also *Political Economy itself as an object*. In order to give this thesis the benefit of its radicalism, let us say that Political Economy, as it is defined by its *pretensions*, has

no right to exist as far as Marx is concerned: if Political Economy thus conceived cannot exist, it is for *de jure*, not *de facto* reasons" (Althusser 1997, op.cit., p. 158).

The predicative and categorical manner in which Althusser declares Marx's rupture with Political Economy, as well as the basic parameters of his analysis, i.e. his approach to materialist dialectics, the epistemological break, the eccentric conception of social totality, the primacy of class struggle, the relative autonomy and interpenetration of the various practices, point to the theoretical potential implicit in the comprehension of Marx's *monetary theory of value*, a key-issue of which is the insistence on the significance of the concept of *value-form*. Marx's approach, based on the concept of value-form, revolutionises and mutates the idea of "labour expended" and so deposes the classical theory of value, letting come to the fore a radically new approach.⁸

By contrast, readings of the theory of value based, e.g., on an "object-subject dialectic" constitute a reversion to philosophical humanism, substituting the Marxist notions of class struggle, capitalist exploitation (appropriation of surplus value as a *social relation*) and the capitalist mode of production with conceptions of a supposed subjection of "humankind" to the "object world" created by "human labour".⁹ The anthropological approach to value is thus formulated, which appears, with forms barely different, in recent analyses of commodity fetishism that present capitalism as "dehumanisation".¹⁰

However, the value-form trend, paving the way to Marx's monetary value theory, was mainly followed by Jacques Rancière, in his text entitled "The Concept of Critique and the Critique of Political Economy from the *Manuscripts of 1844* to *Capital*"¹¹, contained in the full version of *Reading Capital*. Rancière pointed out correctly that

"what radically distinguishes Marx from classic economic theory is the analysis of the value form of commodity (or of the commodity form of the product of labour)" (Rancière, J., op.cit., p. 128).

On the contrary, Louis Althusser's approach to value theory remained ambiguous throughout his texts in *Reading Capital*, as we will argue in section 4 of this paper. To make our argument clear, it is necessary to summarise first Marx's monetary value and capital theory (in the next section of the paper).

2. Marx's Monetary Theory of Value¹²

2.1 The preliminary definition of value in Marx's analysis

In the great self-published work, Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx devotes Part One, which is 120 pages long (Penguin edition) to an analysis of value.

Using his well-known dialectical method of analysis, Marx commences from a simple and wide acceptable definition of value (i.e. the Ricardian definition), as an "unripe notion" or an "ideological" point of departure, which will lead him to the formulation of his own concept of

value.¹³ He writes:

“If then we disregard the use-value of commodities, only one property remains, that of being products of labour. [...] The common factor in the exchange relation, or in the exchange value of the commodity, is therefore its value. [...] How, then, is the magnitude of this value to be measured? By means of the quantity of the ‘value-forming substance’, the labour, contained in the article” (Marx 1990 [*Capital*, Vol. 1], p. 128-9).

Marx devotes the first seven pages of his analysis of value (Marx 1990: 125-31) to formulating and clarifying this preliminary definition. The following six pages (Marx 1990, pp. 132-37) are devoted to the introduction and formulation of the concept of *abstract labour*.

2.2 Abstract labour

Marx approaches the problem of value by way of the question of exchangeability of the products of labour (or of commensurability of qualitatively different use-values): If under non-capitalist modes of production the “market economy” is absent and the *products of labour* are not exposed to relations of equivalence-for-exchange, then it is pointless arguing that under capitalism they become economically commensurable (exchangeable) *because they are products of labour*.

Put in another way, where Classical Political Economy believed that it was giving a conclusive answer (qualitatively different objects –use values– are rendered economically commensurate – exchangeable– because they are all products of labour), Marx simply sees a question which has to be answered: How and why can *qualitatively different kinds of labour* be made equivalents?

“Let us suppose that one ounce of gold, one ton of iron, one quarter of wheat and twenty yards of silk are exchange-values of equal magnitude. [...] But digging gold, mining iron, cultivating wheat and weaving silk are qualitatively different kinds of labour. In fact, what appears objectively as diversity of the use-values, appears, when looked at dynamically, as diversity of the activities which produce those use-values” (Marx 1981 [*Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*], p. 29).

For the riddle of the equivalence of different kinds of labour to be solved, what must be comprehended is the *social character of labour under capitalism*: The capitalist organisation of production and the resultant social division of labour is underpinned by the direct (institutional) independence of each individual producer (capitalist) from all the others. Nevertheless, all these individual productive procedures are linked indirectly between themselves through the mechanism of the market, since each of them produces not for himself or for the “community” but for exchange on the market, *aiming at achieving a “satisfactory” level of profit* (as Marx will explain later in his work). This procedure imposes a social (capitalistic) uniformity on all individual productive activities (production-for-exchange and for-profit) precisely through competition between individual commodity producers (capitalists).

Marx defines this procedure of social homogenisation of individual labour procedures and

productive processes through introduction of the term *abstract labour*. Labour has a dual nature in the capitalist mode of production – on the one hand it is concrete labour (labour which produces a concrete use value, as in any mode of production) and on the other it is at the same time abstract labour (labour in general), *labour which is from the social viewpoint qualitatively identical*. From this stem the overall commensurability and exchangeability of the products of labour, i.e. that they are constituted (produced) as commodities:

“The labour contained in exchange-value is abstract universal social labour, which is brought about by the universal alienation of individual labour” (Marx 1981: 56-7).

Marx argues then that value is determined by abstract labour; however, *abstract labour does not constitute an empirical magnitude*, which could be measured by the stopwatch. It is an abstraction, which is socially constituted (it acquires a tangible existence) in the process of exchange:

“Social labour-time exists in these commodities in a latent state, so to speak, and *becomes evident only in the course of their exchange*. (...) Universal social labour is consequently not a ready-made prerequisite but an emerging result” (Marx 1981, p. 45, emphasis added).

The notion of abstract labour destroys the classical idea according to which value is identified with a tangible-measurable quantity of labour –with socially average characteristics of productivity and intensity– expended on the production of a commodity. Abstract labour manifests itself *only* in the exchange relation of the commodity with other commodities. Marx is able to proceed now to the analysis of the *form of value*, which covers 107 out of the total 120 pages devoted to the formulation of the concept of value (Marx 1990, pp. 138-244)

2.3 Money as the universal form of appearance of value

In order to decipher the form of appearance of value, Marx introduces the scheme of the “simple form of value”, in which, *seemingly*, a quantity of a commodity is exchanged for a (different) quantity of another commodity:

x units of *commodity A* are exchanged for y units of *commodity B*.

Classical economists have thought this scheme to be barter; they further considered that all market transactions may be reduced to such simple barter acts (merely facilitated by money, since, with its mediation, a mutual coincidence of needs is not required any more).

Marx shows however that in this scheme we do not have two commodities of pre-existing equal values (i.e. measured independently, e.g. by the quantity of “labour expended” for their production) exchanging with each other. Instead we have only *one commodity* (the commodity acquiring the first, i.e. the “left-hand position” or the *relative value form*), whose value is measured in units of a different use value (the “commodity” acquiring the position of the equivalent, and thus serving as the “measurer of value” of the commodity in the relative form). The second “commodity” (in the position of the equivalent: B) is not an ordinary commodity (unity of exchange value and use value), but plays simply the role of the “measure of value”, of “money”, for

the first commodity.

The value of the relative (A) is being expressed *exclusively* in units of the equivalent (B). The value of the latter (of B) cannot be expressed; it does not exist in the world of tangible reality:

“But as soon as the coat takes up the position of the equivalent in the value expression, the magnitude of its value ceases to be expressed quantitatively. On the contrary, the coat now figures in the value equation merely as a definite quantity of some article” (Marx 1990, p. 147).

It has come out therefore that the “simple value form” does not amount to equality in the mathematical sense or a conventional equivalence: $x \text{ commodity A} = y \text{ commodity B}$ (which would imply that $y \text{ commodity B} = x \text{ commodity A}$). It is on the contrary characterised by a “polarisation”, i.e. by the fact that each “pole” occupies a qualitatively different position and has a correspondingly different function. This polarisation and this difference result from the fact that value is manifested (i.e., empirically appears) *only* in exchange value.

In other words the simple form of value tells us that x units of commodity A *have the value of* y units of the equivalent B, or that *the value of* a unit of commodity A *is* y/x *units of* B. In its Marxian version, the “simple form of value” measures only the value of commodity A in units of the equivalent B.

From the analysis of the simple value form, Marx has no difficulty in deciphering the *money form*. For this purpose he utilises two intermediate intellectual formulas, the *total or expanded* and the *general form* for expressing value. The second form in this developmental sequence (the *general form* of value) is characterised by one and only *one equivalent* in which all the other commodities express their value. These commodities are thus always in the position of the *relative* value form. Only one “thing” (“commodity”) has come to constitute the *universal equivalent form of value* (Marx 1990, p. 161).

The first feature of money is its “property” of being *the general equivalent*. Thus the relation of general exchangeability of commodities is expressed (or realised) only in an indirect, *mediated* sense, i.e. through money, which functions as *general equivalent* in the process of exchange, and through which all commodities (acquiring the relative position) express their value.

The Marxian analysis does not therefore entail reproduction of the barter model (of exchanging one commodity for another), since it holds that exchange *is necessarily mediated by money*. Money is interpreted as an *intrinsic and necessary element in capitalist economic relations*.

“Commodities do not then assume the form of *direct mutual exchangeability*. Their socially validated form is a *mediated one*” (MEGA II, 5, 1983: 42).

In Marx’s theoretical system there cannot be any other measure (or form of appearance) of value. The essential feature of the “market economy” (of capitalism) is thus not simply commodity exchange (as maintained by mainstream theories) but monetary circulation and money:

“The *social* character of labour appears as the *money existence* of the commodity and hence as a *thing* outside actual production” (Marx 1991, p. 649).

2.4 Marx's monetary theory of capital

The fact that even the most straightforward act, that of exchanging two commodities must be understood as a procedure consisting of two successive monetary transactions, a sale followed by a purchase, in accordance with the formula C-M-C (where C symbolises the commodity and M the money) allows the comprehension of a main inherent trend of the “market economy”: the propensity of money to become independent from its role as a *means* of exchange or a measure of value, its tendency to become an “*end in itself*”: On the one hand in the case of “hoarding” (e.g. as a result of a sale that is not followed by a purchase: C-M), and on the other in the case that money functions as “means of payment”, i.e. when the purchaser appears in the act M-C as “debtor”, “as the mere representative of money, or rather of future money” (Marx 1990, p. 233).

“The circulation of commodities differs from the direct exchange of products (barter), not only in form, but in substance. (...) The process of circulation, therefore, does not, like direct barter of products, become extinguished upon the use-values changing places and hands (...) Circulation sweats money from every pore” (Marx 1990, p. 208).

Taking into consideration the above stated analysis, one comprehends that in Marx's theory of money the notion of the “general equivalent” cannot be the final, but an *intermediate*, provisional and “immature” concept in the course of the theoretical analysis. The same is valid for the sphere of circulation of commodities, which according to Marx builds the outer husk or the surface of the whole capitalist economy.¹⁴

From the moment that Marx introduces the notion of money as the general equivalent he argues that money does not only play the role of a “means” or a “measure”, but that it also tends to attain the role of an “end in itself” (hoarding, means of payment, world money). Here we have to deal with an *introductory definition of capital*, with the (provisional and “immature”) introduction of the *concept* of capital: money functioning as an end in itself.

In order to be able to function as an end in itself, money has to move in the sphere of circulation according to the formula M – C – M. Due to the homogeneity of money however, this formula is meaningless¹⁵, unless for the case that it describes a quantitative change, i.e. an increase in value: The aim of this motion cannot be anything else than the continual “creation” of surplus-money. The formula becomes then M – C – M', where M' stands for M+ΔM.

However, money can function as such an “end in itself” only in the case that it dominates over the sphere of production and incorporates it into its circulation, M – C – M', i.e. when it functions as (money) capital. The exploitation of labour power in the production sphere constitutes the actual presupposition for this incorporation and this motion. Thus

“the circulation of money leads (...) to capital” (Marx 1993 [*Grundrisse*], p. 776).

Marx formulated and then developed the theory of capital on the basis of his concept of value. Capital is value which has been appropriated by capitalists. Precisely because it constitutes value, capital makes its appearance as money and commodities. But the commodities that

function as capital are certain specific commodities: the means of production (constant capital) on one hand and labour power (variable capital) on the other.

The capitalist appears on the market as the owner of money (M) buying commodities (C) which consist of means of production (Mp) and labour power (Lp). In the process of production (P), the C are productively used up in order to create an outflow of commodities, a product (C') whose value would exceed that of C. Finally he sells that outflow in order to recover a sum of money (M') higher than (M).

In the Marxist theory of the capitalist mode of production both value and money are concepts which cannot be defined independently of the notion of capital. They contain (and are also contained in) the concept of capital. Marx's theory, being a monetary theory of value, is at the same time a monetary theory of capital.¹⁶

The motion of money as capital binds the production process to the circulation process, in the means that commodity production becomes a phase or a moment (although the decisive moment for the whole valorisation process) of the total circuit of social capital: $M-C (= Mp+Lp) [P-C']-M'$

"Value therefore now becomes value in process, money in process, and, as such, capital" (Marx 1990, p. 256).

The circuit of social capital attains its dynamics from the exploitation of labour power in the sphere of production. However, it is wider than the commodity production and circulation process, since it embraces also the spheres of credit and finance and the speculation associated with them.

Concluding we may say that Marx formulated a new, monetary, value and capital theory, in radical breach with the classical approach, as Althusser had suggested. Marx's concept of value constitutes a complex notion, a theoretical "junction" which allows the deciphering of the capital relation, by combining the specifically capitalist features of the labour process with the corresponding forms of appearance of the products of labour.

Marx's value-form analysis shaped, therefore, a new theoretical discourse and a new theoretical "paradigm" of argumentation. He showed that the products of labour become values because they are produced within the framework of the capital relation. Further, that value necessarily manifests itself in the form of money.¹⁷ Accordingly, *money is the par excellence manifestation of value and thus of capital*. In a different formulation it is the material embodiment of the capital relation. With Marx's formulation:

"The concept of value is entirely peculiar to the most modern economy, since it is *the most abstract expression of capital* itself and of the production resting on it. In the concept of value, its secret is betrayed" (Marx 1993, p. 776, emphasis added).

2.5 Marx's theoretical ambivalences

Marx's monetary theory of value demonstrates that value and prices are not situated at the same level of analysis. Money is the necessary form of appearance of value (and of capital) in the sense that prices constitute the only form of appearance of the value of commodities. The difference between values and production prices (i.e. prices ensuring the average general rate of profit for the whole capitalist economy) is thus not a quantitative one, assuming that the latter simply arise from the former through a "redistribution of value among capitalists". It is a difference between two non-commensurate and so *non-comparable* quantities, which are, though, intertwined in a notional link, which connects causal determinations (values) and their forms of appearance (prices).¹⁸

However, at certain points of Volume 3 ("transformation of values into prices of production", "absolute ground rent"), Marx distances himself from the implications of his own theory (non-commensurability between value and price) and draws a *quantitative comparison between values and production prices*: through mathematical calculations he "transforms" the former into the latter. In this way, albeit tacitly, he adopts (he retreats to) the classic viewpoint that values are qualitatively identical and therefore quantitative comparable with prices: He accepts the problematic that two individual capitals utilising the same amount of living labour but different amounts of constant capital produce an output of equal *value* but (given the general profit rate) unequal (production) price. He then claims that in order to justify the theory of value one has to prove that, on the level of the economy as a whole *the sum of values equals the sum of commodity prices, while at the same time the total surplus-value should be equal to the total profit*. The "transformation of values into prices of production" was aimed to provide that proof.¹⁹

There so emerges a *second discourse* in Marx's writings, which adheres to the classical tradition of Political Economy. Between the two discourses there exists a notional gap; they are incompatible with each other.

The question is now raised, of what may be the possible causes of Marx's ambivalences towards Classical Political Economy. Answering in a general way, one may say that the issue simply reflects the contradictions of Marx's break with Ricardian theory, contradictions which are immanent in every theoretical rupture of the kind, i.e. in every attempt to create a new science on the basis of the critique of an established system of theoretical (bourgeois) ideology. In other words, the existence of ambiguities or contradictions should be expected not only for Marx but also for any scientific theory (e.g. psychoanalysis, see Althusser 1977) that emerges as a radical theoretical critique of established ideological disciplines.

The epistemological break, whose theoretical significance has been brilliantly illustrated by Althusser, does not mean that the struggle within Marxist theory, against the bourgeois theoretical ideologies, has been (can be) brought to an end:

"Marxist science gives us a paradigm of a necessarily conflicting and schismatic science [...] the Marxist researcher, should take a position in the conflict, the object of which is Marxist theory itself" (Althusser 1977, p. 94).

3. Althusser's contradictions in reading *Capital*

Marx's monetary value and capital theory constitutes a radical break with Classical Political Economy (as with other forms of bourgeois economic ideology: Neoclassical or Keynesian economics). This conclusion fully supports Althusser's affirmation that Marx's Critique of Political Economy queries the existence of Political Economy, as it denies its foundation principles.

However, Althusser came to this conclusion by questioning Political Economy's philosophical and epistemological presuppositions as well as its inability to recognise class relations behind economic categories (due to its embedment in bourgeois ideology) and not by questioning its *concept of value per se* (as "labour expended"), which he does not seem to criticise at least on a systematic basis –with the exception of some isolated comments.²⁰

Very characteristic, in this respect, is his admonition not to commence the reading of *Capital* from the first part of the Volume one ("Commodity and Money", where Marx introduces his value-form analysis and develops his monetary theory of value), but rather from the second part (which gives emphasis rather on exploitation as appropriation of surplus labour, than on value and money as expressions of the capital relation).²¹

Althusser conceives Marx's break with Ricardo primarily in terms of the replacement of labour by a *new concept of labour power* and not so much in terms of the value-form. However, unlike Soviet Marxists, he recognises that Ricardo distinguished between labour and labour power, despite the fact that he used the same word for both notions²². However, Ricardo was not able to analyse the class relations determining the commoditisation of the labour power:

"[T]he course of the analysis had led them [the classical economists, J.M.] forcibly [...] to their resolution of the so-called value of labour into the value of labour power [...] A correct answer is a correct answer. Any reader in the 'first manner' will give Smith and Ricardo a good mark and pass on to other observations. Not Marx. For what we shall call his eye has been attracted by a remarkable property of this answer; *it is the correct answer to a question that has just one failing: it was never posed*" (Althusser in Althusser et al 1997, pp. 20-21, 22).

Althusser became increasingly sceptical about the problematic of the value-form, considering that Marx was seeking a Hegelian-style point of departure in the simpler concept, though this could even lead him to quasi-anthropological misinterpretations (fetishism as reification of man, see also Milios-Dimoulis 2006). The intensely polemical character of many of Althusser's interventions played a contributing role in this ("bending the stick in the opposite direction"). So he repeatedly appeared as fierce critic of Hegel's philosophy, and he repeatedly argued that it had little to do with Marx's philosophical theses.

What is very impressive, though, with Althusser's anti-Hegelianism, is that most contemporary versions of Marxism that share with him the same persistence on the necessity to theoretically distinguish Marx's concept of value from the classical one belong to what could be called

"Hegelian Marxism!"²³ These are mostly value-form theorists, who commence from a Hegelian

philosophical problematique.

This (phenomenal) paradox is probably “resolved” if one considers that there may be “many Hegels”, in a similar way to the fact that there exist many versions of Marxian theory.²⁴ Althusser’s “anti-Hegelianism should be seen as the outcome of a particular theoretical conjuncture with which Althusser took issue. He was required to respond to the categorization of Marxism as a *historicist variant* of the Hegelian philosophy, a tendency particularly strong in the post-war French philosophical scene, which in general attributed greater significance to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* as a “philosophy of history”, and rather less to the *Logic* and the endeavour to develop a semantic tool of greater complexity.

He was obliged to treat theoretical humanism as an idealistic deviation *par excellence* within Marxism, which meant a head-on clash with all theories of *reification* (*Verdinglichung*, *Versachlichung*, *Vergegenständlichung*). He attempted to confront the economism of the official communist movement, expressed above all through support for unlimited development of – by their nature “positive” – productive forces. This involved placing emphasis on class struggle and the conflict-ridden character of capitalist production and necessarily referring less to the effects of the market as a mechanism for socializing individual private undertakings or to *value as a specific social form*.

This circumspection of Althusser as regards value-form explains also his tendency to overlook the contradictory character of the texts of the “mature” Marx *as well*, something which also afflicts the significant concept of symptomatic (“*symptomale*”) reading, since Althusser tended to think that a reading of this kind could extract a relatively unified theoretical nucleus.

However, as we have argued in the previous section of this text, there are contradictions within this “nucleus” itself, which means that for the clarification and further development of Marxist theory a “symptomatic reading” has to be applied also to the texts of the mature Marx (in order, first of all, to distinguish between the two different theoretical discourses to be found in them and to adopt a stance on these discourses).

The fact that we can trace and explain these contradictions in Althusser’s work as related to his approach to the theory of value should not translate into rejection of the need for a reading of the work of Marx deriving from the Althusserian programme. Despite the fact that we stress what we consider to be Althusser’s weak points in reading the first Chapters of Vol. 1 of *Capital* and more specifically the value-form, we do not abandon the main theses of the Althusserian approach: the constancy to a relationist approach to *class* power, the critique of philosophical humanism, essentialism, historicism, economism, and especially the thesis about Marx’s breach with Classical Political Economy.

4. Conclusion

The categorical declaration of Louis Althusser that Marx’s Critique of Political Economy introduces a scientific discourse that fully negates all premises and the whole theoretical edifice of Classical (and contemporary) Political Economy constitutes a crucial epistemological point of

departure which may enable Marxists to comprehend Marx's monetary theory of value.

This theory of Karl Marx constitutes a radical critique of (a rupture from) the Ricardian theory of value (conceived as "labour expended") and is developed in close relation with Marx's value-form analysis, especially in Section 1 of Vol. 1 of *Capital*.

However, Althusser always remained reluctant towards value-form analysis, as he interpreted it as a Hegelian influence on Marx. This stance averted him on the one hand from comprehending the significance of this analysis for the critique of Ricardian value as "labour expended", and on the other from identifying the theoretical ambiguities and dead ends that have been infiltrated even in *Capital* and the other mature economic writings of Marx.

Despite these theoretical contradictions, a reading of the work of Marx deriving from the Althusserian programme is still of highest importance: It is exactly this programme which stresses the necessity for the Marxist theoretician to identify Marx's problematique and further develop his analyses in confrontation with the ruling bourgeois ideologies.

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1 Althusser in Althusser L. and Balibar É (1997), *Reading Capital*, London: Verso, p. 15.

2 Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, Jacques Rancière (1996): *Lire le Capital*, Paris: RUF. (First Edition 1965, Paris: Maspero).

3 Adam Smith had introduced the labour-value problematique with the following formulation: "Labour [is] the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities. [...] Labour [...] is alone the ultimate and real standard by which the value of all commodities can at all times and places be estimated and compared. It is their real price; money is their nominal price only" (Smith 1981: I.v.4 and I.v.7).

4 Althusser seems to target Gramsci when he writes: "is *Capital* merely one ideological product among others, classical economics given a Hegelian form [...]?" (Althusser in Althusser-Balibar 1997, p. 15).

5 All of Marx's mature economic texts in the time span from 1857 to 1867 (starting with *Grundrisse* [Manuscript 1857-58] and ending with Vol. 1 of *Capital* [1867]) carry as title or subtitle this phrase: "Critique of the Political Economy".

6 Apart from *Reading Capital*: Althusser 1990, 1995, 1984.

7 On this subject, and also on Althusser's ambiguities as regards "commodity fetishism", see Dimoulis D. and Milios J., "Commodity Fetishism vs. Capital Fetishism. Marxist Interpretations vis-à-vis Marx's Analyses in *Capital*", *Historical Materialism* 12.3, 2004: 3-42.

8 Althusser seems to point towards the theoretical direction of value-form analysis, i.e. Marx's monetary value theory, when he notes that value is by itself "non-measurable, non-quantifiable", a thesis that rejects all (Ricardian) versions of value as "labour contained": He writes: "The concepts to which Marx expressly relates his discovery and which underlie all his economic analysis, the concepts of value and surplus-value, are precisely the concepts on which all the criticism addressed to Marx by modern economists has focused. [...] Marx has been criticized on the grounds that they are concepts which, [...], remain at heart non-economic, 'philosophical' and 'metaphysical' concepts [...] 'non-operational' concepts designating realities which are non-economic because they are non-measurable, non-quantifiable [...] This point of misunderstanding which the Economists declare the point of Marx's theoretical weakness and error is, on the contrary, the point at which he is strongest! the point which marks him off radically from his critics, and also, on occasion, from some of his closest followers" (Althusser 1997, op.cit., pp. 80-81).

9 Mike Wayne 2005, p. 204, presents a typical example of this anthropological approach when he writes: "Never before in the history of *humankind* has labour been the source of such *productive powers* (mediated by technology and knowledge) and, yet, never before has the *object world* which human labour-power produces been more *powerful over* and independent/autonomous of *human labour-power* than in the era of capitalism" (emphasis added).

10 Holloway 2002, pp. 2-3, 53-54; Homer 2004, pp. 99-105.

11 “Le Concept de Critique et la Critique de l’Économie Politique des ‘Manuscrits de 1844’ au ‘Capital’”, in Althusser et al 1996, pp. 81-199.

12 For what follows see also Milios et al (2002), *Karl Marx and the Classics*, Aldershot: Ashgate. Also, Heinrich 1999 & 2004.

13 Marx comments as follows his dialectical method: “the advantage of my dialectic is that I say things little by little – and when they think I have finished, and rush to refute me, they merely make an untimely manifestation of their asininity!” (Letter to Engels, 27 June 1867, cited in Althusser et al 1997, op. cit., p. 29).

14 “An analysis (...) would show, that the whole system of bourgeoisie production is presupposed, so that exchange value may appear on the surface as the simple starting point, and the exchange process [...] as the simple social metabolism which though encircles the whole production as well as consumption” MEGA II.2: 52 (*First draft [Urtext] of “Zur Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie”, 1858*).

15 Or, better, aimless: it can neither cause a change in the quality nor in the quantity of the entity in motion.

16 “[...] value requires above all an independent form by means of which its identity with itself may be asserted. *Only in the shape of money does it possess this form.* Money therefore forms the starting-point and the conclusion of every valorisation process” (Marx 1990, p. 255).

17 The product of labour “cannot acquire universal social validity as an equivalent form except by being converted into money” (Marx 1990, p. 201).

18 “The fetishized form of value rests on the belief that value has positive content, which lies behind its expression in a price. Marxists widely recognize that there are no intrinsic properties in things, or in their use value, which can account for the quantitative form that value takes. This generally serves to ground a theory in exchange value by rejecting use value. But exchange value cannot reflect a quantitative property embedded in a commodity. In searching for this positive content behind prices, we are necessarily led to essentialise and locate value as a product that lies beyond people’s agency and precedes social validation. The process of valuation, however, is not the validation or the realization of a value already given. It shapes the content itself that it evaluates” (Samuel Knafo, “The fetishizing subject in Marx’s *Capital*”, *Capital & Class* No. 76, p. 161). See also Rubin 1972.

19 The issue of qualitative identity and thus of quantitative comparison between values and prices appears also in Part VI, Ch. 45 of Vol. 3 of *Capital*, when Marx analyses the “absolute ground rent”: “If the composition of capital in one sphere of production is lower than that of the average social capital [...] the value of its product must stand above its price of production” (Marx 1991, pp. 892-93).

20 See for example the passage from Althusser 1997, pp. 80-81, cited in footnote No. 8 of this

paper.

21 Althusser 1976, pp. 52, 59.

22 Marx introduced the term “labour power”, which, of course, is a *major* new theoretical concept distinguishing him from Ricardo. However it is not *the* major point, as we have argued in the previous section of this paper. When the classic economists claim that the “value of labour” (the wage) equals the value of the worker’s means of subsistence, it is clear that they speak about something different from the quantity of labour expended by the worker. In other words, the notion of labour power is to be found implicitly in Ricardo’s (and Smith’s) analysis.

23 I am referring to the works of Chris Arthur (2002), Patrick Murray (2000), Geert Reuten (2000), Michael Williams (1988) and others. As Arthur (2002, p. 1) writes: “a new tendency [...] has emerged in recent years, which is variously labeled ‘the New Dialectic’, ‘New Hegelian Marxism’ or ‘Systematic Dialectic’”.

24 See on this issue Lapatsioras 2006.

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